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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: MEDIO MAGDALENA REGION REMAINS VIOLENT, BUT MAYOR
BRINGS HOPE

REF: A. BOGOTA 3077
[1](#)B. BOGOTA 3133
[1](#)C. BOGOTA 902

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
For Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Barrancabermeja's strategic position, natural resources, and tradition of civic activism have placed it at the center of Colombia's armed conflict. Barranca Mayor Carlos Contreras eschews traditional political clientism and corruption, and said his greatest challenge is breaking the city's deeply entrenched "culture of crime" after so many years of conflict. As in Medellin, (see reftel a), local officials attributed a recent increase in homicides in part to security force successes against narcotraffickers and other criminals. They said the detention of "Pablo Angola," a former paramilitary and narcotrafficker, and 20 other members of his gang was an important blow to organized crime, but conceded that new groups are already fighting for control of Angola's narcotrafficking operations. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) Poloff visited Barrancabermeja in the Medio Magdalena (MM) region on August 22 and met with local Colombian National Police commander Rafael Rojas, local MAPP/OAS director Luca Pena, and Mayor Carlos Alberto Contreras (Comment: Contreras was elected in October, 2007, on a reform platform and enjoys the support of many progressive groups.) Poloff also attended the Inter-sectorial Commission for Life (CIV), a public forum created in 2003 to promote dialogue between the GOC and human rights groups in the highly polarized, violent region (see reftel b). The MM region consists of 30,000 square kilometers surrounding the Magdalena river, and includes parts of four departments--western Northern Santander, western Santander, southern Bolivar, and Eastern Antioquia. The MM has 800,000 inhabitants--roughly 40% of whom live in rural areas.

VICTIM OF ITS RESOURCES

[1](#)3. (C) Barrancabermeja (Barranca) occupies a strategic central location in the heart of Colombia. It is a transportation hub due to its extensive rail, road and river links, making it an excellent location for licit and illicit activities. Barranca Mayor Carlos Contreras told us the vast jungles with dense tree cover provide an ideal location to hide terrorists and coca laboratories. He said the southern Bolivar region in particular has been used as a

drug-production point, with the Magdalena River serving as a primary shipment route.

14. (C) The presence of petroleum--Barranca produces about two-thirds of Colombia's oil--together with coal, gold and emeralds--make the MM an ideal location for extortion and kidnapping. Local MAPP/OAS Office Director Lucas Pena told us the ELN, FARC, former paramilitaries, and criminal groups exploited the resource-rich area to fund their operations. He said kick-backs in the form of jobs at the state-owned Ecopetrol refinery, as well as featherbed contracts, illegal taxation of peasants' crops, and theft of gasoline from the pipeline and refinery, were common.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND VIOLENCE

15. (C) With a long tradition of leftist political activism, many human rights activists in Barranca claim they are victimized because of their activities. The MM CNP Commander Rafael Rojas told us human rights defenders, unionists, and students were often targeted by the paramilitaries in 2000-01 as they killed anyone they perceived as tied to the FARC or ELN. Pena said that until the paramilitary "taking" of Barranca in 2001, most peasants in the region supported or sympathized with the ELN. He told us corrupt local officials and a lack of state presence led to popular support of anti-government movements. Mayor Contreras said criminal groups (once the ELN, then the paras, now organized crime) influence Ecopetrol jobs and municipal contracts. The city's

last seven mayors were tied to either the ELN or the paras. Contreras said his greatest challenge is eliminating the city's deeply rooted criminal culture.

MAYOR COMBATS THE SYSTEM

16. (C) Contreras said he is committed to breaking down Barranca's entrenched system of kickbacks, clientism and narco-penetration of public institutions through the implementation of transparent, participatory, budget practices. He claimed his efforts to cleanup government contracts have generated strong resistance from traditional politicians allied with criminal groups, leading to numerous unjustified investigations designed to harass and disrupt his reforms. Contreras voiced concern about the "pressure" he was under, saying he might have to compromise to have enough time to dedicate to his numerous social and economic programs. Father de Roux, the head of the Jesuit Peace and Development Program in Medio-Magdalena (PDPMM), told us in February that Contreras would need strong international and central government support to withstand pressure from corrupt local interests.

17. (C) Contreras said that as part of the participatory budget process, he has allocated about \$3 million to the population--they get to decide how the money is spent within their neighborhoods. Next year, he plans to allocate \$5.7 million to this process. He notes Barranca has 380 demobilized paramilitaries and 32,000 displaced persons, further complicating the political and security environment. MAPP/OAS claims there are 585 demobilized in Barranca. Contreras' development plans include an international port, a free trade zone, as well as a "petroleum cluster."

SOUTHERN BOLIVAR REMAINS KEY

18. (C) CNP Commander Rojas told us southern Bolivar is the most important coca production region in the MM, attracting major narcotraffickers. He noted a major CNP success with the recent arrest of former paramilitary "Pablo Angola" and the issuance of arrest warrants for 30 members of his narcotrafficking gang--so far the CNP has detained 20.

Still, Rojas said Angola's arrest has created a free-for-all among narcotraffickers trying to fill the vacuum. Rojas confirmed 47 murders in Barranca so far this year--up from a total of 37 in all of 2007. He noted the majority of the victims had criminal records. The Rastrojos from Valle de Cauca department, the remnants of the twins or "Los Mellizos" criminal organization (Victor Manuel was killed and his twin brother Miguel Angel was arrested earlier this year), and the gang led by Daniel Rendon (Don Mario) are competing for control of Angola's operations. Pena and Rojas confirmed the FARC and the criminal groups cooperate to produce, process and transport drugs throughout the MM region.

VIOLENCE CONTINUES

¶9. (C) MAPP/OAS National Coordinator Nordgren told us three demobilized paramilitaries and their psychologist were injured in Barranca in an attempted homicide in early August ¶2008. Another demobilized paramilitary was injured in an attempt against his life in late July 2008. Nordgren said the violence against the demobilized largely stem from reprisals for their refusal to join the new criminal groups, as well as the "settling" of old debts. Pena also noted the recent murder of a demobilized paramilitary in La India in early August 2008--the para returned after leaving the area due to threats. Pena claimed the ex-para was killed due to his testimony on the Cimitarra Battalion's (5th Brigade) collusion with the former paramilitaries. Nordgren said that after the murder, the MOD transferred the battalion commander.

¶10. (C) Rojas said the CNP continues to investigate threats against civic, human rights, and religious groups. He told us the arrest of Angola will help, but the security situation remains volatile. Rojas conceded that the CNP has been unable to identify the specific sources of many threats, but notes that to date most threats have not translated into violence. He meets with the threatened organizations on a monthly basis to discuss concerns and ensure their security profile remains adequate.

BROWNFIELD